

Year-end reports on predator control proved how fast the problem is increasing in the shortgrass country. Herders of stoic natures bemoaned the losses and the futility of fighting an over-matched battle. Just the figures from three counties showed the seriousness of the threat to sheep and goat producers. Not only were bobcats, coyotes and red fox increasing, but the heavier weight killers, the panthers, were also added to the list.

One animal control program in a large county reported 17 panthers apprehended in '96. Stories seeped into San Angelo coffee houses of more than 50 of these dangerous beasts being hunted down in the Fort Stockton country. Too, bears from Big Bend Park and Mexico made headway as far east as Devils River. Added to the menace were the wolves being turned out at White Sands, New Mexico. About all herders needed for more heartbreaks was to hear a train load of circus animals had escaped in their midst.

Panthers and bears, along with wolves, pose a new problem. The longer-toothed predators are fierce enough to kill the dogs and donkeys being used to help hold back the coyotes and bobcats. Those big long-haired Pyrenees dogs may scare panthers off as the big cats are easy to tree. Burros, however, are among panthers' favorite foods, so effort is going to have to be made to find a guard to protect the guard animals.

I shudder to think what's going to happen when we herders have to start packing larger caliber weapons to shoot bears and panthers. Many of us are already so restricted by thick bifocals and high fidelity hearing aids, we couldn't see the front sight of a derringer pistol in broad daylight and couldn't hear a mountain lion scream unless he was in the back yard.

Man has probably always tried to find a natural solution to pests and predators. As far back as when my Grandfather Noelke patented his lands, he vacated a line camp shack because of rattlesnakes crawling in the back door. He imported a flock of guinea hens from South Texas to drive the rattlers back in their dens.

Guineas cackle and cluck p-tah-p-tah until the snake's nerves becomes so frazzled, the trauma brings on a premature shedding of their skin severe enough that they die from exposed tissue. The South Texas strain of guinea hens is the best in the world at controlling snakes. At peak performance, a full-blood cow jungle-raised guinea will make Saint Patrick's legend sound like an Irish jig on a Saturday night.

The Sonora Experiment Station is planning a test using rheas, the South American ratite, for protection from bobcats. The station was given the rheas by a rancher down at Sanderson on the Rio Grande. The donor released rheas and emus on his place last year, hoping to reduce the goat losses from bobcats. His deer hunter bought him 16 emus to

add to the dozen or so rheas. The Sanderson rancher said over the telephone the other night, "I don't know whether the cats were being bothered by the rheas or emus. They (the birds, not the cats) have gone over several fences since we turned them out. But one thing for sure, my saddle horse and sheep dogs are plenty upset."

The potential of ratites to control predators sounds favorable. Emus don't use nerve warfare like guinea hens. Limbered up and in good shape, a grown emu can kick higher than Magic Johnson ever jumped for a basket. According to the rancher I talked to at Sanderson, he knew of an outfit adjoining a townsite that was plagued by chronic dog trouble. After emus were released on the ranch, town dogs stopped raiding goat pastures the packs had besieged since puppyhood.

I know a partner of mine had to resort to a burro to keep the Mertzon packs from destroying his flocks. But as soon as the burro fought the dogs back, bobcats detected the absence of dog scent, and renewed their attack. How I got involved was because of a more serious dog problem. The next door neighbor in Mertzon kennels a breed of lap hounds with highly developed vocal chords. These mutts yip straight time for 20 to 30 hours, until their throats hurt so much, they start howling. I wanted to borrow his guard burro on the donkey's day off to ride around the block a few times to make an impression on this canine chorale. But I was turned down so short, I dropped the idea. The burro's owner is

still a little touchy about a set of windmill elevators I borrowed a few years ago.

As the overhead goes up on emu ranchers, custom predator control may offer a new income. The guineas died out from attrition and neglect, but by that date, snakes were no longer a problem...